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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies issues to consider as educational policy makers make decisions about diploma options and graduation policies for students with disabilities, especially in the context of the increasing use of requirements that students pass specified tests to graduate. A table compares advantages and disadvantages of four diploma options: (1) standard diploma or better (single criteria); (2) standard diploma or better (multiple criteria); (3) certificate options; and (4) special education diploma. The paper then considers the use of special options for some students and identifies the related issues of non-approved accommodations and the phase-in approach. The following sections discuss requirements for different diploma options, the availability of re-testing opportunities, and the need for dropout prevention policies and an appeals process. Suggestions for inclusive and fair diploma options and graduation policies include the following: have the same diploma options available to all students; recognize that not all students demonstrate high-level knowledge and skills in the same way; give names to diploma options that correspond to the knowledge and skills demonstrated by the student; clarify the implications of different diploma options for continued special education services; get input from stakeholder groups about diploma options and policies; and use the media to explain diploma options to the public. (DB)

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DIPLOMA OPTIONS AND GRADUATION POLICIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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NCEO POLICY DIRECTIONS

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Diploma Options and Graduation Policies for Students with Disabilities

Background

Discussions of diploma options for students with disabilities often are heated. Arguments focus on the meaning of a high school diploma versus the possible negative long-term effects for youth who do not receive diplomas. The consequences of graduation and diploma policies last well beyond the time when a student is in school. Efforts to make the high school diploma mean something should be combined with efforts to prevent negative effects on students.

As more and more states and districts implement graduation tests, they are faced with several questions. For example, is a standard diploma the only option that should be available to students? Should there be some type of diploma for students who do not pass the test but who meet other criteria? Should there be another type of diploma available just to students with disabilities? If more than one type of diploma is available, what specific requirements should be aligned with each diploma option?

Questions about diploma options generate additional questions about other graduation testing policies. For example:

- How many re-test opportunities should there be for students not passing the graduation test, and should there be special conditions attached to these retakes?
- Should an appeals process be available for those students not passing the graduation test after multiple attempts?
- Should students be permitted to take graduation tests using accommodations currently not allowed in a state's accommodations guidelines?

In this report, we identify the issues to consider when answering these questions. We also provide suggestions for establishing inclusive and fair diploma options and graduation policies.

Diploma Options

Many kinds of diplomas and certificates are used across the U.S. to document that a student has completed school. Some of these diplomas and certificates are just for students receiving special education services. Few states have only the standard diploma available to students. Some states have tests that students must pass to earn a diploma, while others do not.

We focus in this report on the issues and recommendations for diploma and certificate options when tests are part of the graduation requirement. At this time, there are 16 states that have had their exams in place long enough to affect a graduating class. Many

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more states have developed graduation exams that students in future graduating classes will have to pass to receive a standard diploma. Additional states have just begun to develop the exams that have been legislated. Add to these, numerous local exams to determine whether students will receive diplomas.

The 16 states with active graduation exams have diploma options that reflect the interesting array of diplomas and certificates and criteria for earning them that currently exists across the U.S. The diploma and certificate options fall within four general categories, each of which has advantages and disadvantages (see Table 1). While we highlight here what is happening in states, these apply as well to local level diploma options.

Same for All?

Only six of the states with graduation exams have the same diplomas and certificates available to all students (Louisiana, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, South Carolina, and Texas). Having the same diplomas and certificates available to all students does not necessarily mean that all students are expected to earn them in the same way. For example, in one of the six states, students with disabilities are required to complete the same coursework as other students, but can be exempted from the test and still receive a standard diploma. There are no other options for students without disabilities—they

Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Diploma Options

Diploma Option/Policy	Advantages	Disadvantages
Standard Diploma or Better; Single Criteria. A standard diploma or a more rigorous option (e.g., honors diploma) is available to *all* students. All must meet the same criteria for earning the diploma.	• Provides students the "key" to entry into post-secondary institutions or employment. • Meaning of earning a diploma is clear because there is only one set of criteria. • Maintains high expectations and a focus on the general education curriculum.	• Does not recognize the different learning styles of students with disabilities. • May result in a significant number of students not receiving any kind of exit document from high school.
Standard Diploma or Better; Multiple Criteria. Some students are allowed to meet one or more of the requirements in different ways from other students (e.g., different courses, meeting IEP goals, exemption).	• Recognizes that students have different learning styles and skills that may not align with typical graduation criteria. • Insures that more students will get a diploma than would with a single set of criteria.	• Reduces quality control on the knowledge and skills of students leaving schools. • Results in non-standard sets of knowledge and skills among students, all of whom have the same diploma.
Certificate Options. Certificates for attendance, completion, achievement, etc. are available to *all* students. Requirements can vary considerably, and may or may not allow students with IEPs to meet them in different ways.	• Maintains the integrity of the requirements for earning a standard diploma. • Provides other exit options for students not meeting the requirements for a standard diploma.	• Produces students with diploma options about which we have little knowledge of their consequences for post-secondary schooling or employment.
Special Education Diploma. Diploma or certificate available only to students with IEPs. This type of diploma typically is added to other options for non-IEP students.	• Recognizes that students with disabilities may be working on different standards from other students.	• Flags those students receiving special education services. • Does not promote access to the general education curriculum.

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must pass the test and complete required coursework. However, an appeals process is available to all students.

Special Options for Some?

Nine states with graduation exams have special diplomas or certificates that can be earned only by students with disabilities on IEPs (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, and North Carolina). The names of the special diplomas and certificates include IEP Diploma, Adjusted Diploma, Occupational Diploma, Graduation Certificate, and a variety of others.

Another approach is to have special notations, either on the standard diploma or on a related document (such as the transcript). For example, one state, whose class of 2000 is the first that must pass the state's graduation test, the specific conditions of testing are noted on the student's progress record. For example, students with disabilities who either pass the test at a lower level or who use a non-approved accommodation (such as have the reading test read aloud), have the notation "Pass Individual" marked on the progress record. Those students who pass under the same conditions as other students, or who use approved accommodations, have the notation "Pass State Level" noted.

Issues to Address When Only Standard Diplomas Are Available

If a state or district decides to have only a standard diploma, requiring students with disabilities to pass the same test as other students means that the state must have a broad and fair assessment. Two issues must be addressed: (1) what to do when a student needs non-approved accommodations, and (2) deciding whether a phase-in approach makes sense.

Non-Approved Accommodations

There are some accommodations that students need in order to have access to a test. Students who are blind and have not learned to read Braille (as in a recent case) are essentially denied access to the assessment if the test is not read to them, regardless of whether the test's content is mathematics, reading, or some other content area. The same argument can be made for students with significant reading disabilities, and other conditions as well. Denying access to the assessment because of the effects of a disability, especially when the assessment provides access to a benefit (such as a diploma), is likely to raise many concerns.

Providing a certificate of attendance for these students does not seem to be reasonable since it could be argued that they have met the standards and simply are not being allowed to appropriately show their mastery of them. One approach is to have a special request process, through which students needing non-approved accommodations could request permission from the state to use specific accommodations, with the reason for needing the accommodation documented. For these students, test performance might be just one part of a larger body of evidence required for meeting graduation requirements. Before taking this approach, it would be wise to get an estimate of how many students there are who need non-approved accommodations. If there are too many students, consideration should be given to expanding the range of approved accommodations or developing more inclusive and accessible tests.

A Phase-In Approach

Historically, students with disabilities have been either excluded from the general education curriculum, or have received a watered-down version of the curriculum. While there are pockets where students have indeed had the same exposure and opportunities that other students have had to master the general education curriculum, for the most part this is not the case. As a result, it is inappropriate to expect that today's ninth grade students have had equal access to the general education curriculum and standards.

Because of significant questions about opportunity to learn, it might be wise to implement an extended phase-in of the requirements for students with disabilities. For example, those students now in elementary school would be the first required to meet the graduation requirements.

Requirements for Different Diploma Options

If a state or district decides to have multiple diploma options, it must consider requirements for each option. If it is determined that

completion of credits does count—seat-time and exposure to content is important, and therefore deserving of recognition—then a name should be applied to a document earned in this way. Thus, students who complete current requirements for courses and credits would earn a certificate of completion, a certificate of achievement, a certificate of attendance, a high school certificate, or some other named certificate. Many names for the certificate documents not specifically for special education students are currently in use. Regardless of the specific diploma options that are available to students, it is important for states and districts to clarify the requirements for each type of diploma, and to make this information widely available.

Re-testing Opportunities

When there are graduation tests there is often pressure to increase the number of opportunities for students to take the test, and to move the retest times closer to the time of instruction. If field test items are included in each administration of the test, there may be pressure to remove these items when students retake the test, thereby resulting in shorter forms of the test.

How re-testing interacts with disability issues should be considered. Re-testing must be available to students with disabilities just as often as it is to other students. This means that special editions of the test are needed, and accommodations need to be provided during re-testing. Some states have found that decision makers request additional accommodations with each re-take, under the belief that more accommodations will give students the benefit needed to pass (or, perhaps, with the recognition that certain accommodations really are needed even though the student hoped not to need them). Changing rules about test format, administration procedures, or testing accommodations for re-testing must be addressed.

Appeals Process

Students who do not pass the graduation test, even after taking the test on repeated occasions, are likely to follow one of three pathways. First, they may drop out of school. Second, they may continue to re-take the test until they complete all their coursework. Third, they may bring a lawsuit. It is desirable to reduce the number of students doing either the first or the third of these options.

Dropout prevention strategies need to be addressed and implemented. In addition, an appeals process that ensures fair consideration of individual student needs may reduce the number of lawsuits. Little is known currently about the number of states with appeals processes in place. However, they do exist. Typically, the process is open to all students, with or without disabilities. The nature of this process should be defined before the need for it arises.

Suggestions for Inclusive and Fair Diploma Options and Graduation Policies

The considerations highlighted in this report suggest several avenues to take toward establishing a set of diploma option policies that are reasonable, yet fair, to all students, including students with disabilities. Among the suggestions are the following:

- **Have the same diploma options available to all students.**

This implies that there would be no diploma option designated just for students with disabilities.

- **Recognize that not all students demonstrate high-level knowledge and skills in the same way.**

This means that there must be other avenues to diplomas, such as an appeals process that is available for a small number of students. (It is advisable to obtain a good estimate of the possible number of students so that whatever is proposed for them is manageable.)

- **Give names to diploma options that correspond to the knowledge and skills demonstrated by the student.**

These options should recognize, but not necessarily encourage, diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge and skills (see Table 2 for possibilities). The only outcome not covered in Table 2 is passing the graduation test but not completing the required coursework. Consideration should be given to how these cases are handled. For example, a Comprehensive Diploma might be awarded if the student can gather a body of evidence showing acquisition of the breadth of knowledge covered in required coursework. Another diploma option, such as a Certifi-

cate of Mastery, might be added to indicate completion of just the graduation test requirement.

▶Clarify the implications of different diploma options for continued special education services.

Students with disabilities who have graduated from high school with a regular diploma may not be eligible for special education services. State and local laws vary with respect to continued special education services, so it is important to specifically define and make public these kinds of implications of diploma options policies. Defining what constitutes a "regular" diploma is an important part of the clarification.

▶Get input from stakeholder groups about diploma options and policies.

Include, at a minimum, teachers, union representatives, administrators, parents, individuals with disabilities and their families, representatives from institutions of higher education, business leaders, and legislators.

▶Use the media to explain the diploma options to the public.

Develop brochures for schools to give to students and to forward with transcripts to post-secondary institutions and employers explaining the meaning of the various high school diploma options that are awarded.

▶ Concluding Remarks

Including students with disabilities in graduation exams raises many issues that can be addressed up front, before they undermine the program. One of the issues is whether there should be diploma options designated just for these students. As states and districts consider the possibility of differentiated diploma options, the requirements that would be attached to different options, re-testing, and an appeals process, there is a need to step back each time to consider the intended and unintended consequences of each alternative.

The quagmire of low expectations, off-target teaching, and denial of responsibility for students with disabilities forms a tragic set of unintended consequences that rise to the surface when addressing accountability and students with disabilities. Balancing these against a desire to be fair to students and to not harm them creates significant challenges for states and districts today. While difficult, this is certainly better than avoiding the issues, only to find that they have grown rather than disappeared.

Table 2. Exit Options with Names Reflecting Skills

Comprehensive High School Diploma— awarded to students who complete coursework and pass the graduation test, with or without approved accommodations. There would be two other ways to earn this diploma:

- Students with IEPs could take the graduation test with a nonapproved accommodation, if they have a comprehensive and convincing body of evidence demonstrating that they had met the standards covered by the graduation test. An independent group, either in the state department or external to it, would review the evidence to make the determination. Tight criteria would need to be developed for these cases.
- For all students who repeatedly have not passed the graduation test, this diploma could be earned by developing a comprehensive and convincing body of evidence (including class grades, extracurricular activities, and other convincing evidence) demonstrating that they had met the standards covered by the graduation test. This avenue is similar to the **appeals process** used in some states. An independent group would review the evidence and make the determination. Tight criteria would need to be developed for these cases.

Course Completion Diploma—awarded to students who complete the required coursework, but who have not passed the graduation test (either because they had repeatedly failed the test, or because they were **exempt** from taking the test). The required coursework completed could be: (a) a standard course of study, (b) an advanced course of study (including honors or Advanced Placement classes, if available), or (c) a modified course of study (including either special education courses or basic skills courses). Consideration could be given to explaining the coursework completed on the diploma (e.g., Certificate of Course Completion—Advanced; Certificate of Course Completion—Standard; Certificate of Course Completion—Basic).

Certificate of Attendance—provided to students who do not pass either the graduation test or coursework requirements, but who have attended school for the required number of years.

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About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in the identification of outcomes and indicators to monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities. NCEO addresses the participation of students with disabilities in national and state assessments, standards-setting efforts, and graduation requirements.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE).

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NCEO *Policy Directions* is a series of reports that address national policy issues related to students with disabilities. This report was prepared by Martha Thurlow and Sandra Thompson, with input from many individuals. It is available in alternative formats upon request.

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